

Displacement and subalternity: masculinities, racialization and the feminization of the other

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Abstract

In different historical and cultural contexts it is important to examine the ways in which diasporic and transnational relations are a key process of societal change, which may involve complex forms of dislocation and integration. Drawing on a qualitative research project on immigrant men in Portugal, we aim at disentangling the ways in which community identities are constructed in a gendered manner, with differences pertaining to the constitution of specific diasporic communities (Brazilians, Cape Verdeans and Mozambicans), hailing from diverse Portuguese colonial and post-colonial histories. We contend that for a deeper understanding of the overall consequences of migration and transnationalism, a gender perspective, which is often neglected when tackling cultural encounters and multiple modernities, is mandatory. For immigrant men, the experience of otherness, even if permeated by cultural entanglements, hybridity and social inclusion, is marked, in most cases, by subalternity. This subordinate condition, of being a discriminated stranger, a categorized other often experiencing feelings of frustration and disenchantment with the 'European dream', is reinforced by racialized/ethnic otherness vis-à-vis the dominance of whiteness. The ways of dealing with discrimination lead to the construction of identities, along national lines of origin, in a highly gendered form, namely in terms of masculinities. As a consequence, Portuguese and European men are strongly devaluated and viewed as feminine and emasculated. Simultaneously, Portuguese women tend to be perceived as strongly masculinized. Conversely, immigrant men tend to stress self-definitions of identity that give priority to a virile sexuality and bodily performances as a way to compensate for the lack of other capitals of masculinity (e.g. financial and public power). However, these strategies can be quite paradoxical. On the one hand, there is a reinforcement of a defensive communitarist

sense of belonging that ultimately leads to ghettoization. On the other hand, there are also aspirational processes operating through the mimicry of the dominant other, even if these are often conflicting and contradictory. In sum, at the same time, immigrant men do aspire to power in many-sided ways (namely by reinventing multiple forms of male bodily performativity) and tend to shut themselves to inclusion in the dominant Portuguese gender order, frequently being complicit with their own fetichization as Other.

Key Words: Masculinity, hegemony, subordination, otherness, migrant men, post-colonialism, modernity, power

1. Men at the margins: subalternity and hegemony

The expansion of transnationalization processes (from capitalism to culture) has paved the way for new forms of building up masculinity to emerge in contemporary societies. Migration movements from the global South to the global North posed new challenges to men, in their individual lives, and to the gender order, as an institutional whole. Indeed, the rapid flow of bodies, information and imageries of manhood, which are rapidly dislocated from one social setting to another, have set difficult challenges to research about men and masculinities. These challenges must necessarily lead us to reconsider the notion of hegemonic masculinity as well as the dynamics of power that sustain, still, the gendered hierarchy of some over the others, as Hearn (2009) has pointed out with the concept of transpatriarchies. For this reason, further advancing our reflection on how men in subordinate positions (re)construct their identities and practices by reference to the norm of masculine power, success, virility and whiteness (the key principles upholding hegemonic masculinity) is of paramount importance. By focusing on different groups of immigrant men living in contemporary Portugal we aim to contribute to the empirical knowledge of the ‘subordinate’ vis-à-vis the hegemonic and explore the ways in which ethnic community identities are constructed in a gendered manner by men who lived through processes of displacement. Additionally, we expect to examine the boundaries between subordinate and dominant and discuss the concept of hegemonic masculinity and the problems it has raised. From our perspective, the differentiation between subordination and domination is not as clear as it may seem and cannot be conceptualized outside a perspective that perceives the complexity of making the one into the other: the processes of otherness. On the other hand, the emphasis on otherness implies that we envisage masculinity as a complex structure of capitals mobilized in the permanent struggle for identity and some kind of supremacy, even one that works by reinventing the power of the subordinate. This power, though

problematic and potentially ghettoized, can also contribute to change what hegemonic masculinity represents and, most importantly, it might lead us to question what the concept means. In sum, by looking at the margins it is perhaps easier to disentangle the imageries, and even symbolic contradictions, of the centre.

From the 1980's onwards, transnational masculinities have been widely debated (Connell 2005) and new concerns were raised. One important subject has been the transnational flows of men who migrate from one place to another, normally from poor southern countries to the comparatively much richer northern societies in search of a better life, many times to face hardship and even the shattering of the once cherished 'western dream'. Research focusing on migrant men has expanded and provided us with information on how marginalized and subordinated masculinities are compelled to change, at least to a certain degree, when men have to adjust to a different gender order and quite often to a different conceptualization of what hegemonic masculinity is (e.g. Donaldson et al. 2009).

A valued masculinity can be many things and enacted in different ways. This array of different symbols associated with masculinity and with male power allows men to reconstruct their position as dominant subjects in very different ways, at least discursively. But power is also discourse, even if we must not forget the material basis of inequality. Poor immigrant men are not powerful if we define power in materialistic terms, but their global subordination does not inhibit them from aspiring to power, which they try to demonstrate and enact, particularly in relation to women but also to other men, through complex strategies (violence, for instance) and discourses.

The contemporary remaking of masculinities as a transnational process generates a perhaps more complex hegemony of men (e.g. Hodgson 2001, Ouzgane and Morrell 2005, Cornwall and Lindisfarne 1994, Howson 2009, Ong 1999). In a world shaken by massive changes in gender relations, men's lives and identities are shifting, thereby revealing, at the micro-level, the multiplicity (Eisenstadt 2000) and the entanglements of modernities (Therborn 2003). From the point of view of male power, in postcolonial Portugal immigrant men find themselves caught up between different 'worlds' of meaning. Gender relations are not immune to global change, but are evolving into hybrid forms of masculinities, rather than simply adapting to western ways, though the influence of the West is paramount.

In this sense, men and masculinities constitute an object and a perspective of research which implicates multiple levels of analysis and complex connections between them. As a result, it is worth developing the dialogue between material and discursive approaches to power, simultaneously avoiding either the reification of masculinity or its dissolution into an endless plethora of discourses. Although masculinities are multiple, and it is therefore reductionist to speak of men or masculinity as uniform categories, it would be an error to forget that men's power is structural and thus forms a consistent set of societal patterns at the same time as

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it is culturally shifting and individually embodied in flexible ways (e.g. Connell and Messerschmidt 2005, Hearn 2004). Advocating such a theoretical and methodological strategy implies keeping abreast of concepts such as patriarchy or hegemonic masculinity, yet without losing sight of domination as a process operating fluidly at multiple levels and as ultimately constitutive of the subject (Foucault 1977). A discussion of Connell's definition of masculinities as hierarchically organized multiple configurations of practice forming a hegemony is paramount. However, if we place the processes of masculine domination at the centre of gender relations we still have to find theoretical tools to grasp domination as structure, discourse and agency-related. In this respect, Marx's notion of 'appropriation' may be of help, if we are able to go beyond a materially driven definition and extend the concept of appropriation to culture and symbolic goods as well as agency and embodiment. The process of incorporation (e.g. Bourdieu 1977) implies appropriation, and this appropriation is always a power-based process. Drawing upon Bhabha's (1994) work on appropriation and mimicry, Demetriou (2001), among others, has argued for masculinities – particularly hegemonic masculinity – to be conceived as appropriating traces of non-hegemonic masculinities. In this regard, masculinities are socially constituted through complex struggles for the acquisition and reallocation of certain symbols and material positions. The embodying and performing of gender, while linked to power differentials, implies processes of appropriation that must be viewed as dynamic and flexible. As a consequence, a reflection on power and hegemony must consider the hybrid character of masculinity. In their practices men permanently use various references, but not exactly through the most peaceful negotiations. Hegemonic masculinity is not just a symbol of domination over women and other forms of masculinity, but rather it is particularly dependent on tension within it. An additional difficulty emerges whenever we aim to trace out the main traits of hegemony. In other words, the main problem is perhaps to find a heuristic way of distinguishing between what is hegemonic and what is not.

2. Immigrant men in a postcolonial society

This paper focuses on the diasporic masculinities of immigrant men living in Portugal's capital city, Lisbon. This was part of a wider research project on non-dominant men and their identity strategies in dealing with subalternity and domination.¹ The selection of immigrant men, in a total of 45 in-depth interviews, sought to attain a wide diversity of colonial and postcolonial histories vis-à-vis the colonial centre.

The bulk of interviewees were Brazilians (20) who are, today, the larger migrant group in Portuguese society. Brazilian relations to the former colonial power are ambiguous, even if Brazil can be characterized as a European settler society (although with highly marked Black African and Native American demographic and cultural strands). On the one hand, Brazil's independence was

attained quite early on, in 1822 in the context of the South American liberations of the early 1800s. From the onset of independence, Brazil became a recipient society of Portuguese migrants. As a result, Portuguese migrants, and by contagion Portugal, were seen depreciatively. Of course, the downgrading of the Portuguese developed within the complex racial classifications of Brazilian society. Even if the official rhetoric depicts it as a racial democracy, Brazil still presents a system of hierarchical categories of race and colour, whose apex remains whiteness to the detriment of Black or Native American admixtures. On the other hand, in the last few decades, Portugal became increasingly seen as a rich Western European country, and whose culture was perceived by Brazilians as similar to their own – not only linguistically, but also regarding sociability.

The two other groups represent a very different colonial background – the late Portuguese colonialism in Africa – and exemplify, at each pole of the spectrum, opposite colonization strategies. Both Mozambique and Cape Verde only attained independence in 1975, after a long war. However, Mozambique was a strongly racial colonization: not only the legal difference between ‘Blacks’ and ‘Whites’ was paramount, but also native populations were constrained to forced labour. From 1961 onwards European settling highly increased. The preponderant colonial system was basically akin to *apartheid*, enhanced by the proximity of South Africa and the importance of British economic interests in Mozambique. Quite differently, in Cape Verde the colonial strategy followed by the Portuguese state produced a mixed society, resulting from the mingling of Portuguese settlers and of dislocated Black Africans (the islands of Cape Verde were uninhabited before Portuguese discovery). This creolization process impacted on racial identities and categories as, overall, Cape Verdeans do not perceive themselves as ‘Black’ but as mixed (*Mestiços*). Both Mozambicans (15 interviews) and Cape Verdeans (10 interviews) started migrating to Portugal from 1975 onwards.

The receiver society for these different immigrants, Portugal, could be characterized as a backwards society until the changes brought forth by the revolution in 1974, which put an end to three decades of an authoritarian, conservative and colonialist dictatorship. Although Portuguese colonial practices were highly racist, official discourse denied it, praising the supposed Portuguese lack of racial discrimination and soft and integrative colonialism. Notwithstanding, Portuguese culture and society is pervaded by racial categorizations. At present, a systematic ‘subtle racism’ prevails, even if official discourse and the legal framework are straightforwardly anti-racist. Likewise, until the mid-seventies, official and legal discourses in Portugal enforced a strongly asymmetrical gender order of masculine domination. This is now profoundly changed. Not only Portuguese democracy enacted absolute formal equality between men and women and developed anti-conservative gender equality policy measures in a wide number of fields, but also, siding with the sharp decrease of Catholicism, profound changes, ranging from female paid labour (one of the highest in the world, namely

full-time) to the dissemination of individualized life-styles or LGBT rights, have paved the way to a more symmetrical gender order.

When dealing with these groups of immigrant men we were concerned with a number of analytical problems. Namely, how to apply conceptual categories such as hegemonic and subordinate to the analysis of non-hegemonic or discriminated men and masculinities? And how to combine material and discursive approaches to power without neglecting the agency of the subordinate? As a tactic, we focused on the aspirations of these immigrant men to be/become/have the absent 'capitals' of manhood, analysing the different strategies and discourses for self-empowerment when dealing with otherness, scrutinizing rebellion and protest as a way to escape subjection, but also looking at complicit and contradictory modalities of masculinity and community identities.

3. Diasporic masculinities and the dialectics of otherness

Our main findings reveal that these three groups of immigrant men have quite different forms of dealing with displacement, though a number of commonalities could be identified. All of them are engaged in what we can define as the dialectics of otherness. In brief, they are the Other but at the same time that fetishized otherness (Ahmed 2000) becomes a complex process in which immigrant men also transform Portuguese and European men (as well as women) into 'others'. Otherness is sedimented as a form of mutual recognition, which permits to the subordinate a gain in terms of identity as they use a number of strategies for disempowering the dominant. Even if immigrant men mimic western ways (Portuguese but mainly the westernized imageries of masculinity) they all feel the need to empower themselves by recreating difference. A difference mainly constructed through the body and sexuality as a sort of weapon of true manhood that is denied to Portuguese and Europeans, in general. The latter are generally emasculated and their constant feminization (as weak and dominated by more powerful and undesirable women) clearly shows the extent to which the feminine is still a strong weapon of devaluation. For Mozambicans, Portuguese men are '*men in a bottle*' (subordinated to women), for Cape Verdeans they are weak, for Brazilians they are sexually powerless and unfit to conquer women. At the same time, also as a commonality, the Portuguese weak or even gayish men are the dominated partners of masculinized women, who behave like men, are sexually unattractive, have too much body hair, and are to be avoided, in stereotypical terms.

In spite of these common strategies, the difficulties in dealing with *racialized* discrimination are dealt with in different ways, which are clearly underpinned by the history of colonial inheritances and ambivalent views of Portugal as a European nation that was the old colonizer. In other words, the forms of dealing with the supremacy of whiteness are different for historical reasons. Brazilians strive to hide their racial features (when they are obviously not in

conformity with the body of a white man). Cape Verdeans, who often consider themselves as “the whites of Africa” tend to demonstrate ambiguous feelings when ambiguously discovering blackness in the Portuguese context. Mozambicans, who were already aware of their blackness, feel, in spite of this, the reiteration of blackness beyond their expectations. In a way, the old fallacy of luso-tropicalism whereby the Portuguese would be softer, less racist and more open to stereotypical tropicalist bodily performativities is shattered and substituted by the cold reality of the facts. Then, as Portuguese become colder and whiter, immigrant men, discovering a stronger otherness than ever imagined, end up by falling in this dialectics of otherness and resort to difference to regain some power. Even if there are a number of ways of reconstructing masculinity and many-sided othernesses, subordination has to be dealt with.

4. The commodification of masculinity in the post-colonial context

Our empirical work led us to reflect upon what some authors have labelled the commodification of masculinity, paying special attention to the ways in which men’s discourses point to the struggles between domination and subjection. One striking fact is that by referring to commodification, we are reproducing the ways in which men organize their discourses and practices, always awarding a certain value to a certain good (material or symbolic), which mimics, to some extent, the capitalist dynamics of economic exchange. A number of symbols are appropriated by men and used performatively to enact masculinity and avoid a feeling of complete exclusion. In a way, and following Baudrillard’s (1996) reasoning on the ‘object value system’, signs and symbols can be exchanged as commodities insofar as meaning (which can equal value in a Marxian sense) is created through difference.

Men empower themselves in multiple ways and using a wide number of categories that range from those embedded in custom to those linked to western imageries of masculinity. By using their bodies as if these were ‘capitals’ of manhood men reflexively trade their bodily abilities (from violence to sexuality) in a sort of market of goods, in which the body and sexuality are seen as opposed to money or other forms of institutional power. This allows marginalized men to achieve a feeling that they can be valued men without having money or any other form of materially based power. As a result, white men are emasculated insofar as they are considered less virile and softened. They become others in a complex game of otherness, in which there seems to be, at a first glance, little coherence in discourses about masculinity.

These processes can be reconstructed through the categories men use to describe themselves and others. However, all of these ‘labels’ represent the entanglement of different symbolic categories – those of the countries of origin, those of colonial discourses, those of contemporary Portugal – with global imageries and many examples could be given. Most of these labels represent a kind

of rebellion against the power held by others, but simultaneously they also reveal a will of not being left out of what is hegemonic in terms of masculinity. Therefore alternative and even marketized forms of building up masculinity are only partially rebellious insofar as they do not really contribute to the emancipation of women and comply with patriarchy, at least in the majority of cases.

However, more important than presenting a list of local and global imageries, which could result in the description of a number of types of masculinity, is to grasp the processes that underlie the use of such discursive categories, which ultimately contribute to maintain the hegemony of men (Hearn 2004). In this train of thought, there are three key processes that must be taken into account when analysing diasporic masculinities: aspiration, mimicry and disenchantment. Men aspire to emancipation and to their share of hegemony (e.g. Howson 2009), which they so often see as unattainable. In an attempt to escape subordination, mimicry plays a key role insofar as strong entanglements between different symbols are constructed in a way that generates new categories and also new forms of enacting masculinity. But there is also a degree of disenchantment produced by frustration and a feeling of unattainability. This is quite obvious when we analyse the ways in which men play with the categories of otherness. And, this is also blatant when we take into account the feeling of exclusion that affects a great fraction of male immigrants, who see themselves deprived of the material and symbolic 'goods' that would grant them a powerful masculinity. In a way, disenchantment is deeply tied with the awareness of being alienated and deprived of recognition and redistribution (Honeth and Fraser 2003).

Finally, a central conclusion is related to the importance of transnational capitalism in reproducing power and inequality. But, more than just a material mode of production, capitalism – and the the marketized discursivity that it upholds – appears almost as an 'ontological' reality that, in a strong way, implies tying together the symbolic and the discursive with the material groundings that support still a patriarchal gender order, or in better words, the continuity of patriarchy. The idea of masculinity as a capital can only be understood in this way, which is, of course, highly indebted to Marx's theorization of value and the many developments that followed. For now, the important aspect to retain is that the notion of capital can both include and weave together the discursive and the material. The marketized semantics of masculinities at the margins is, in this sense, closely linked to the hegemony of men, which implies different but effective strategies of appropriation, through sophisticated forms of competition, of socially produced value, whether material or symbolic.

Notes

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